

CORN LAWS.

A P P E A L **TO** **T R A D E S M E N** **IN** **TOWN AND COUNTRY.**

BY
ONE OF THEMSELVES.

LONDON:
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—
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AN APPEAL, &c.

BROTHER ELECTORS,—I would address you, in all plainness and sincerity, as one having no interests apart from your own. I possess no land, nor have I any prospect of becoming the owner of any. My capital is embarked in trade ; my income is solely derived from that source. I can have no bias, therefore, except it be in favour of those interests which I have in common with you all.

We are now daily beset with entreaties to assist in the warfare carrying on against the existing corn laws. I wish, therefore, seriously to ask myself, and to ask you, whether it be right or wise to join in this warfare. To determine this point, it will be advisable to look both at our own interests, and at those of the community at large. Will you accompany me, for a few minutes, in this inquiry.

The first and most common way of putting the question is, by asking you if you are not in favour of “ cheap bread ? ” With a very few shallow persons this single argument suffices ; everybody, they suppose, must wish for “ cheap bread.”

But such as are not quite so hasty or superficial, do not require to be told that mere cheapness of the necessaries of life does not of itself constitute a state of prosperity. When an Irishman was asked, at a shop in London, sixpence for four eggs, he protested against the extortionate demand. “ Why, in Mayo,” he exclaimed, “ I could have had two dozen for sixpence ! ” “ And why, then,” he was asked, “ did you not stop in Mayo, since you could buy things so cheap there ? ” “ Because,” he replied, “ I could not get the sixpences to buy them with.” This little anecdote shows us the real nature of the question. To all of us, whether tradesmen or journeymen, the main thing is, not to be able to buy food cheap, but to have plenty of trade, plenty of work, good profits, good wages, so as to have the means of buying what we want, whether cheap or dear.

Let us look at this point a little more closely. Probably my own case may be like many of yours. If the corn laws were repealed, and bread were thus reduced 2d. or 3d. per loaf, I

should probably save, in my household expenditure, some £6. or £8. a year. This would be the whole sum that would accrue to me by the change. One single dull season would do me more injury in six months than the lowering the price of bread would do me good in twenty years. This very spring, in consequence of the stagnation in trade, caused by the late Budget, I shall lose at least £300. of my ordinary income. Obviously, therefore, the saving of £6. a year in the article of bread, would not repay me this loss in forty years. So clear is it that the mere price of bread is a trifling matter, when compared with the far more important question of a good or bad state of trade.

But it may be said, that although this may be true of the tradesman, who spends but a small part of his income in bread, the case is far different with the labouring man, the greater part of whose earnings are expended on the necessaries of life. The case, however, is *not* different. To the labourer or journeyman, no less than to his master, a steady flow of business, constant work, and good wages, are things of far higher importance than the mere price of bread. To be out of work for a month or six weeks in the year, or to have his wages beaten down by competition, would far more than counter-balance any advantage the working man might derive from a reduction of the price of bread. And if the repeal of the existing corn-laws threw many of the agricultural labourers out of work, as it assuredly would, and forced them to flock into the towns for employment, it is quite certain that the competition for work thus occasioned must bring about a great reduction of wages.

In fact, what else is it that the great manufacturers are now aiming at? They are spending thousands upon thousands in agitation; paying scores of fellows to run about the country lecturing and collecting petitions; and what is their object in incurring all this trouble and expense? Does any one suppose that they are spending vast sums of money out of pure benevolence, and merely to make bread cheaper to the poor? Nothing of the sort ever enters into their minds. Their object is to increase their own trade, by being better

able than at present to compete with the foreign manufacturer. And how is a repeal of the corn laws to bring this about? Obviously, *by enabling them to reduce wages*. This was explicitly stated by Mr. Muntz, the Member for Birmingham—a sincere and earnest radical—in the debate of May 17.

He said—

“ If the corn laws were repealed, the benefit which the manufacturer expected was, that he could produce at a lower price; and this *he could only do by reducing wages to the continental level*.”

We have advanced so far, then, as to see that a reduction in the price of bread would not *necessarily* prove a benefit either to the tradesman or to the labourer. It would do no good to the tradesman, if along with it there came a slackness of trade; or to the labourer, if it were accompanied by a reduction of wages. So much being clear, let us now endeavour to trace the probable working of the change proposed.

It is wished that in future our ports should be at all times open to foreign corn, a small fixed duty being levied. The result, no one doubts, would be, the influx of a large quantity of such corn, brought in at lower prices than our own farmers are in the habit of obtaining. This, we must assume, would be the case, or else the change would be utterly useless. Those who advocate it plainly tell us that they expect foreign corn to be brought in in large quantities, and that the result will be, that bread will be *cheaper* than it now is. Let us look, then, at the working of this change. A single million of quarters of wheat are worth, at present, 3,000,000*l.* sterling. Probably, from Poland we might buy and import the same quantity for 2,000,000*l.* We are urged to do this—*first*, because it is said to be common sense to “ buy where we can buy cheapest;” and, *secondly*, because, if we took our corn from the Poles and Prussians, they might, perhaps, take our manufactures in return. Now, is it not strange, that those who argue that the Germans *cannot* take our cottons and woollens, except we will take their corn in return, do not perceive that the argument applies both ways. If the German cannot buy of you,

except you will buy of him, how is the English farmer to buy of the manufacturer, if the latter prefers to deal with a Pole or a Prussian for his corn? Suppose that only a million of quarters of wheat are imported. You have thus deprived the English farmer of your custom, to the extent of 3,000,000*l*.* Our home trade is at once reduced by that amount. And in its room you have only a chance, a *possibility*, that out of the 2,000,000*l*. you are to pay the Polish or Prussian corn-grower, he *may* happen to lay some of it out in your manufactures. Meantime, how will the change work at home? Foreign corn, at foreign prices, will be brought into our markets, and that in sufficient quantities permanently to reduce prices. This must be what the advocates of the repeal of the existing corn laws contemplate,—or else their cry of “Cheap Bread” would be a mere cheat and an imposture. The price of corn in our markets, then, would be permanently lowered. Lord Western, an old Whig, and a practical farmer, has shown, that in the generality of cases the farmer could not live on the prices that he would then obtain, *even if he paid no rent*. It is clear, then, that a great part of England under these circumstances must cease to be cultivated; and the people now employed in its culture must be thrown out of work and out of bread. And this is not a mere party outcry. Lord Charles Fox Russell, brother of Lord John, said at the Bedford meeting of the 15th of May,—

“If the protective duties are repealed, 2,000,000 acres of land must go out of cultivation, and *immense numbers of labourers* be reduced to *a state of starvation*.”

And a very different man, Mr. Muntz, of Birmingham, said, in the debate of May 17,

“If you repeal the corn laws without making any alteration in the monetary system, *the land would pass out of the hands of the present owners*.”

What does this last expression imply? First, that the farmers would

* This supposition is far below the probabilities of the case. The Chancellor of the Exchequer's estimate seems to be, that *four* millions of quarters would be annually imported;—reducing the English farmers' trade to the extent of £12,000,000. per annum!

be unable to pay their rents, or, in short, to cultivate the land at all, so as to compete with the prices of Poland. Secondly, that the farmers being first ruined, stripped of all they had, and forced either to fly the country, or to go into the union-workhouses, the labourers would, in the regular working of the system, be thrown out of work in tens and hundreds of thousands. Thirdly, that the land in most cases paying no rent, and devoured by heavy poor-rates, would become of no value to the owners, who would be forced to part with it, either to pay off debts or encumbrances, or in order to realize any means they could of otherwise supporting life.

To say, then, that "the land would pass out of the hands of the present owners," is to describe a fearful revolution. But this is not all. Having destroyed the landed gentry and the farmers, what portion of the home trade would remain? Or what recompense would the precarious trade carried on with the continental corn countries make for the loss of a large part of the home demand? And lastly, upon whom would the burden fall of supporting those hundreds of thousands of agricultural labourers who had thus been thrown out of employ? Contemplate, then, friends and neighbours, the whole of this fearful prospect, and ask yourselves what has any one of us to gain by the abolition of the corn laws? If we take the metropolis alone, can we suppose that the tradesmen of London and Westminster would ever gain as much by a cheapening of the 4lb. loaf from 10d. to 8d., as they would lose by sending half the aristocracy and landed proprietors to husband their remaining resources in Germany or Italy? Still less can the provincial towns hope to prosper amidst the ruin, alike of the landlord and the tenant, the proprietor and the cultivator of the land. While, for the labourer, whether in town or country, what but misery can await him from a change which deliberately proposes to take the business of growing corn for the people of England out of the hands of English farmers and English labourers, and to transfer it into the hands of the serfs of Poland.

I feel utterly at a loss, then, to discover what class of the community (except, perhaps, a few large manufacturers at Man-

chester or Stockport), can be the gainers by taking our custom from the English agriculturist, and giving it to continental corn-growers. Nothing can be clearer than that we, the tradesmen of London, shall not; inasmuch as a great part of the trade in London consists in selling to the landed aristocracy who reside in or visit the metropolis, and in supplying the country towns with goods, for sale to the owners and occupiers of the land in their vicinity. Just as certain is it, that the latter, the country towns, must be ruined by such a change; since their prosperity depends upon the prosperity of the land-owners and cultivators of their neighbourhoods. And, both in town and country, the workmen, whether mechanics or labourers, must bear the chief weight of the distress that will arise. If we deliberately resolve to employ some hundreds of thousands of Polish peasants in growing corn for us, nothing can be clearer than that we do thereby resolve that some hundreds of thousands of our own labourers shall be thrown out of work. And the depression of wages which must arise from such a sudden overflow of the market of labour may be in some degree anticipated by looking at the case of Ireland, in many parts of which, owing to the scarcity of work and great number of men seeking employ, the wages of an able-bodied man do not exceed *twopence half-penny a day!* In every point of view, then, I consider the withdrawal of the protection given to our own agriculturists to be a proposition the adoption of which would be an act of absolute suicide on the part of an English legislature. And in this belief I ask you, except you can invalidate the above statements, to give no aid to the present attack on our existing corn-laws.

A LONDON TRADESMAN.

Fleet Street, May 26.